



## PANDEMIC POSSIBILITIES FOR APPLIED LINGUISTS' ACTIONS

George M Jacobs (*Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation*)  
Chau Meng Huat (*Universiti Malaya*)

### Abstract

This article challenges applied linguists and other academics to think and act outside of the box to help society confront COVID-19, future pandemics, and other crises that humans and other earthling currently face and that lie on the horizon. These outside-the-box actions by applied linguists can involve not only the research we do but also the ways we share our work and how we teach our students. Nine examples of such actions are provided, and readers are urged to collaborate in this crucial work.

**Keywords:** Pandemic; applied linguists; collaboration; Sustainable Development Goals; Anthropocene; environmental education

**Resumo:** Este artigo desafia linguistas aplicados e outros acadêmicos a pensar e agir fora de sua torre de marfim para ajudar a sociedade a enfrentar a COVID-19, pandemias futuras e outras crises que os humanos e outros terráqueos enfrentam atualmente e que já estão no horizonte. Essas ações podem envolver não apenas a pesquisa que fazemos mas também as maneiras pelas quais compartilhamos nosso trabalho e como ensinamos aos nossos estudantes. Nove exemplos de tais situações são apresentados e os leitores são convidados a colaborar nesse importante trabalho.

**Palavras-chave:** Pandemia; linguista aplicado; colaboração; objetivos do desenvolvimento sustentável; antropoceno; educação ambiental.

### 1. Introduction

Academics have many matters to consider as they go about their work. In normal times, these matters include the flow of ideas in their field of study and related fields, their students' learning, how to assess their students and how their students will assess them, their relations with colleagues at their own and other institutions, and their career progression and salaries. As if these matters

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were not enough, another matter increasingly on the minds of academics in these times involves their role in addressing the many crises facing the human race, crises that seemingly increase in severity as we proceed into the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Might the pandemic and other crises, such as the climate crisis, lead to pushed changes, that is, changes that we might or might not want to make but that are forced upon us by the exigencies of circumstance.

This article explores possible actions academics can take and asks questions about the role of a specific set of academics in humanity's response to these crises: academics who study how language influences human understanding and behavior. These academics include linguists, applied linguists, communication scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists. For convenience, the term *applied linguists* will be used for all academics who consider and seek to harness the power of language.

The authors of this article are not urging applied linguists to stop everything and focus solely on these crises. Applied linguists still need to attend to teaching, assessments, and their own personal needs, now and in the future. What we are suggesting is that applied linguists and other academics might want to more consciously articulate for themselves and other stakeholders (and, isn't everyone a stakeholder?) how what they do helps make the world a better place at a time when some people believe humanity may be heading off a cliff, or perhaps multiple cliffs. Of course, we appreciate that what some see as paths to improvement others view as routes off the same or other cliffs.

In writing this article, the authors hope to encourage brainstorming, sharing of work, division of labor, and other forms of collaboration. We also appreciate that our message is not an original one: making the world a better place has long preoccupied academia and much has been done and is being done. This article serves merely as two academics' effort to generate even more thought, discussion, and action. Furthermore, we trust that it goes without saying that applied linguists' efforts need not be limited in either of the following two ways. First, what applied linguists do can go beyond what we teach and research. It can also include such matters as how we teach and how we share our research with others. Second, while yes, academics are very busy with our duties at our institutions, our skills and energy can also be channeled into making a positive impact beyond academia.

### **2. Applied Linguistics examples**

The bulk of this article is taken up with examples of how the authors have employed their applied linguistic and other skills to address some of the crises faced by humanity and our fellow earthlings. We list these in order to share our experience in hopes of inspiring and learning from others. We are painfully aware that we can increase both the quantity and especially the quality of our research and publications. Furthermore, we have a great deal to learn about how to use our work to involve, inform, and motivate others, not only in academia but also among the public, government, and various institutions.

### 1) **Relative quantity of media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic vs coverage of people dying from lack of basic needs**

In the second quarter of 2020, when international awareness of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic was sinking in, Chau et al. (under review) wondered about media attention to the new pandemic threat compared to media attention to the longstanding problems of lack of food, clean water, and sanitation. They used corpus and computational tools and techniques to examine coverage in four leading print newspapers: the New Straits Times (Malaysia), the Straits Times (Singapore), The Guardian (United Kingdom), and the New York Times (United States).

As of 1 November 2020, approximately 1.2 million people have died from COVID-19 (WORLDOMETRE, 2020). In comparison, Mercy Corp estimates that nine million people die annually from hunger (NPR, 2020), not to mention deaths from lack of clean drinking water and sanitation. Yet, Chau et al. found that coverage in the four newspapers was overwhelmingly dominated by the lesser cause of death: COVID-19. Future researchers might want to investigate the relative coverage of other media, including social media, as well as asking media leaders for their explanations for the researchers' findings. Furthermore, in addition to food, clean water, and sanitation, the United Nations promotes other Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020). These too may be worthy of applied linguists' attention.

### 2) **The use of the relative pronoun *who* with nonhuman animals**

Many scientists believe that the Earth is experiencing a new geologic age, moving from the Holocene to the Anthropocene (National Geographic, 2020). The name Anthropocene derives from the fact that in this current age, humans are the dominant factor determining what happens on the planet, as the human population approaches eight billion, and the power of our technology to impact the Earth's other creatures multiplies. For instance, some scientists believe that due to human intervention, the Earth is experiencing a Sixth Mass Extinction (CARRINGTON, 2017).

Is it fair that humans dominate our fellow animals? Some people's answer to this question is based on the view that these other animals have more in common with objects, such as smart phones and staplers. Language may play a role here. The use of the relative pronouns *which* and *that* to refer to other animals could encourage people to equate them with things; whereas using *who* acknowledges what the science increasingly tells us: nonhuman animals are sentient beings with a right to life (GILQUIN; JACOBS, 2006). Gilquin and Jacobs used corpus analysis to look for instances of the use of *who* with nonhuman animals. They also looked at the advice given in publication guides and grammar analyses.

More recently, Chau and Jacobs (under review) submitted a commentary to an applied linguistics journal to disagree with the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, which in its latest edition, the 7<sup>th</sup> edition, counsels that the use of *who* should be restricted to humans. The commentary looks at progressive changes championed by this manual in an effort to reduce bias in language in areas such as sex and disability, and calls on the American Psychological Association to revise its advice in regard to the selection of relative pronouns for use with nonhuman animals. Future research might like to explore similar issues in other languages, as well as the practices of language teachers and other gatekeepers.

### 3) Perspectives on a tiger-human interaction incident

One particular example of potential human-caused species extinction involves Malayan tigers whose population has dwindled to about 200 individuals. In 2019, two tigers entered a village in rural Malaysia. Although no humans were injured, the incident generated attention in Malaysia and nearby Singapore. Jacobs and Fong (2020) conducted an ecolinguistic study of 10 online articles on the incident from established media sources. The researchers noted a strong human-centric perspective in the articles. They contrasted this with a humans-as-fellow-animals view which sees nonhuman animals as thinking, feeling beings. As humans further encroach on the habitats of other animals, more such incidents are certain to occur. Applied linguists might like to examine the perspectives used in media reports of these incidents. Are the perspectives human-centric or do they show humans as fellow animals. Klöckner (2015) offered many ideas for such examinations. Additionally, Stibbe (2015) provided a detailed scheme for doing ecolinguistic analysis, as well as a free online course for mastering that scheme.

### 4) Instructional materials

**a.** The United Nations provided guidance on how to do environmental education (UNESCO/UNEP, 1997), with six elements which can also be applied to education in many other areas. Those six elements are awareness, understanding, an attitude of concern, skills needed to address the areas of concern, ability to evaluate proposed solutions, and participation in efforts to implement those solutions. Jacobs and Goatly (2000) examined 17 language coursebooks both for the presence of environmental issues as well as for whether the participation element was included. They found a good deal about the environment in the coursebooks but very little that involved students in participation on behalf of environmental protection.

**b.** In another study of instructional materials, Jacobs, Teh, and Joyce (2016) looked at the presence of animals in 22 language coursebooks and then categorized the types of animals found, that is, wild animals, animals for human consumption, animals used in research, companion animals, work animals, animals viewed as pests, animals in entertainment, and extinct animals. The two largest categories were wild animals and animals used for human consumption. However, if all the animals used by humans, e.g., also the animals used in research and the work animals, had been combined into a single category, that would have been the largest.

**c.** The food we nearly eight billion humans consume accounts for a major part of our impact on the planet and its other inhabitants. Jacobs, Joyce, and Subramaniam (2018) looked at ten English language coursebooks for the inclusion of food and found that 17% of the books' activities had at least one mention of food, and that seven of the ten book had an entire unit on food. Next, the researchers attempted to categorize the foods into animal-based (e.g., meat, eggs, and dairy) and plant-based. Evidence suggests that consumption of plant-based foods correlates with improvements in human health, environment protection, and animal welfare (Carrington, 2020).

**d.** Rather than studying about instructional materials, Lie, Jacobs, and Amy (2002) worked with university lecturers in Indonesia to create a book of environment-focused lesson plans for non-

English majors. The lessons were based in Indonesian contexts and included the UN's participation element, mentioned in Jacobs and Goatly (2000).

e. Many issues lie within the topic of materials. In addition to instructional materials, there are promotional materials. One area under applied linguistics that has examined promotional materials is critical linguistics, also known as critical discourse analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 2013). For instance, Stibbe's (2015) analysis framework has been used to find evidence of greenwashing (i.e., falsely claiming to be environmentally friendly) in many companies' promotional materials. Jacobs and Dillon (2019) attempted a critical discourse analysis of the promotional materials for two types of burgers, those made from traditional meat from animals and plant-based burgers. Food offers many research possibilities, e.g., given the significant increases in the availability of alternatives to animal-based foods, e.g., clean meat (meat made from animal cells, not involving the killing of animals (SHAPIRO, 2018).

### 5) Sharing about resources

Publications by applied linguists and other academics can take many forms. In addition to the usual books, book chapters, and journal articles, commentaries were previously mentioned in this article. Reviews of books and other works constitute another form of publication. Book reviews provide a means of supporting other academics' work, of introducing important ideas to new audiences, and sometimes bringing possible errors to the attention of book authors and others. One example of using book reviews to highlight important ideas was Jacobs' (2017b) review of the book *Even Vegans Die* which sought to pushback against a feeling of superiority projected by some vegans - (full disclosure – Jacobs is a long-time vegan). This kind of contrarianism can be essential in change efforts. Another example of highlighting crucial ideas was Jacobs' (2017a) review of *Are We Smart Enough To Know How Smart Animals Are?* (de Waal, 2016). This book challenged the speciesist view that humans are far superior to all other species of animals and may therefore use them for human benefit without regard to the suffering inflicted.

### 3. Other examples

#### 6) Academic conferences

Attending conferences can be a highlight of academic life, providing opportunities to visit attractive locations, socialize and share ideas with colleagues, meet with publishers, and burnish one's resume. Conferences can also provide an important source of funds for professional organizations. On the negative side, not only can conferences be expensive for academics whose institutions do not finance their participation; international conference travel results in release of greenhouse gases. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancelation of many academic conferences or their conversion to online events, there was some movement toward use of online tools at academic conferences, e.g., allowing online presentations. However, when Jacobs, Tan, and Teh (2018) contacted the organizers of 77 academic conferences to ask about online presentations, the response was not very positive. Of the 52 who replied, only 14 permitted virtual presentations. The article also made suggestions for how to do such presentations. Of course, 2020

has seen major growth in the use of the technology for online presentations and academics' familiarity with that technology. Nonetheless, more needs to be done to achieve academic communication that is both green and effective.

### **7) Cooperation and collaboration**

Cooperation will be essential to addressing the many urgent crises confronting humanity and our fellow earthlings. Unfortunately, the authors' experience suggests that students, not to mention their teachers, often have neither the level of cooperative skills needed for successful cooperation nor the motivation to deploy those skills. (The two authors sometimes also fall short in those regards.) This dearth of cooperation is especially unfortunate, as a great deal of research supports the view that students and others benefit both cognitively and affectively from collaborating with peers (Ibáñez, García Rueda, Maroto, & Kloos, 2013; Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Slavin, 1991; Van Ryzin, Roseth, & Biglan, 2020).

**a.** Therefore, part of academics' task in attempting to solve the various crises we face must be to confront attitudes that militate against cooperation, e.g., the views that much of life is a zero sum game and that people only take assistance, but do not provide assistance in return. Jacobs and Greliche (2017) provided statistical and research support for overcoming anti-cooperation attitudes. For instance, they explained the benefits of cooperation in three contexts in which norm referencing is employed: standardised exams, class grades, and class rank. A key support for their explanation was research suggesting that teaching others using elaboration, rather than merely sharing answers, helps everyone, not just those receiving the teaching.

**b.** In a related study, Jacobs, Kimura, and Greliche (2016) looked at incivilities among students at a Japanese women's college. To a surprising degree, incivilities occurred even among these students, further highlighting the need to spend curricular time enhancing student inclination and ability to cooperate. One means toward achieving that goal involves academics cooperating with their own peers and letting their students know about the value of that cooperation.

**c.** Another recent example involves the second author who was part of an international collaborative project on journalism and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) mentioned earlier. It is a three-year (2019 – 2022) multinational Erasmus+ project that involves nine research teams from Europe and Asia. Guided by the team from Universidade de Santiago de Compostela of Spain, the teams from Romania, Luxembourg, Cambodia, China, and Malaysia are now developing courses that focus on the SGDs for journalism training in their countries. All the representative team members attended a kick-off meeting, which included talks on issues from gender and town planning to animal welfare and environment conservation in relation to journalism, media reporting, and the SDGs. The final goal of the project is to equip students and journalists-in-the-making with the necessary skills and mindset to contribute to sustainable development through bias-free and independent media reporting (see Figure 1 for a reporting of the meeting in the local newspaper).



**Figure 1:** The kick-off meeting of the Erasmus+ project on journalism and SDGs in Spain

### 8) **Reaching out to the public**

Sharing with other applied linguists is important, finding ways to share our knowledge with the general public may be even more important. This partly underlines the approach by the Erasmus+ project noted earlier, in which student journalists who attend the courses to be developed contribute to more responsible and helpful media reporting in the future. Of course, there are many other ways of accomplishing this goal of reaching out to the public. These include joining community organizations, working with governments, using social media channels, and linking with traditional media. Jacobs and Lewis (2018) did this by authoring a commentary for a regional online publication. Their commentary brought a research-based perspective to the debate over how to slow global warming. Furthermore, the piece attempted a conciliatory tone: rather than the authors presenting vegan diets as all or nothing, they presented options such as reducitarianism (eating less animal-based foods) and flexitarianism (usually, but not always eating plant-based).

### 9) **Changing from within**

If you want to change the world, start with yourself first. This saying particularly holds true when it comes to the central argument of this article. Changing from within involves self-reflection, becoming conscious about our beliefs, and taking action. It involves knowing what matters and what deserves our attention and energy. We have suggested earlier that what applied linguists do can go beyond what we usually teach and research, and that we can contribute our little effort to making the world beyond academia a slightly better place for all of us. But this necessarily starts with a conscious change within ourselves. Are we ready to embrace change from within, then to apply our skills and energy to positive change beyond our offices and institutions? The COVID-19 pandemic and the other crises we face may provide ideal opportunities for such reflection. The two authors of this article have been collaborating among the two of us and with others to utilize some of these opportunities.

## 4. **Conclusion**

Applied linguists and other academics are busy, and the pandemic has only made matters worse, bringing untold uncertainties to our professional and private lives. Yet, the pandemic and the



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likelihood of future zoonotic pandemics (GREGER, 2020) escalates the necessity of applied linguists focusing on this and other crises discussed in this article, not to mention those not included here. In other words, we need to bring some of our attention outside our ivory tower comfort zones (JACOBS, 2019). Nothing less than the future of humanity depends on it. We, the authors of this article, are confident that we applied linguists are up to the task of seizing the possibilities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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